

The Experimental Art

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Perhaps it is because we have for so long treated nonfiction as a “non-creative” or “non-literary” genre—somehow distinct from the fiction, poetry, and drama that are the focus of creative writing and literature courses—that we so frequently treat composition, the principal likely (though not inevitable) site for college students to generate nonfiction, as something other than a course in writing. The pendulum of composition studies cyclically swings away from attention on the writer and composing processes—into critical reading, problem solving, cultural studies, critical theory, interdisciplinary discourse—and then swings back toward writerly concerns again. But even when we aren’t focused on these kinds of concerns, nonfiction in composition courses is often taught as if it were a predictable art, as if there were something about nonfiction that allowed its writers to evade or ignore the processes and strategies writers in “creative” genres go through. The rise of creative nonfiction and the emphasis on nonfiction as a “fourth genre” has helped draw attention once again to writing from the writer’s perspective. It’s helped to remind us that, like other forms of writing, nonfiction is not a predictable art. Nonfiction writers need to experiment with meaning and experiment with design. Nonfiction is an experimental art.

The nonfictionist needs to determine the design demanded by the material. We’re dealing with reality here; the material of nonfiction is always what’s already out there to begin with; it’s not something we manufacture out of whole cloth but something we have to make sense of *by means of* an essay or a memoir or an article. We experiment when we explore the material, when we gather and research information, when we try to make connections and determine relationships and see what fits and what doesn’t. The shape of a work of nonfiction arises from its subject; its design emerges as the *result* of composing rather than from *rules* for manufacturing it. It’s rather like Michelangelo’s approach to sculpture, starting with a block of marble, then trying to “liberate the slave in the stone,”—that is, discover what the marble tells him ought to emerge from the sculpting. In a similar way, nonfiction discovers its form in the subject.

Sometimes the form that emerges is a strict chronology or a step-by-step process. Sometimes it is a movement from particular to general or from general to specific. These are traditional patterns, to be sure, but no writer decides first to write in such a pattern and then locates material that will fill it; instead, the writer works with the material and tries to discern an appropriate shape as understanding unfolds. Sometimes experimentation will lead the writer to traditionally linear or conjunctive forms; I think a Montaigne essay, in its

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meandering stream-of-consciousness, is following the course of its own experiments with meaning.

But sometimes experimentation will lead the writer to a design so untraditional it seems never to have been used before. Nonfiction is an experimental art because it experiments with meaning as part of the discovery process and with form as part of the presentation process.

Reflection Rag

Let me offer up a specific essay to serve as illustration. Consider Christine White's "Reflection Rag: Uncle Joe, Roberto Clemente, and I." It begins with this short paragraph:

So much happened so quickly after Uncle Joe died. The tempo changed. This new rhythm blew aside the curtain and there it was, this other order of things that lies beneath or beyond; a hidden stage where we play out our lives and strange bedfellows mingle and the orchestra plays ragtime and spirits stand in the wings, feeding us lines, leading us home. (206)

The essay is rich, complex, intricate, multi-faceted, and the paragraph is a prelude, an introduction, an overture, to the movements which follow. It is a segmented essay, and each segment has a separate title: "Exit Uncle Joe," "Enter Roberto Clemente," "Arriba! Arriba!," "What the Music Means," "Grace Notes," "Hypertime," and so on. The essay begins with a segment on the death of her uncle Joe, raised in Pittsburgh but dead in Colorado, and the succeeding segments follow an unpredictable thread of connections. While waiting for Uncle Joe's funeral, the narrator attends a ragtime music festival and hears a rag called "Roberto Clemente." It is named for the Puerto Rican right-fielder who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates while Christine White was growing up in Pittsburgh.

"Reflection Rag" goes on to explore the unexpected connections between the author, her uncle Joe Roberto Clemente, Scott Joplin, and ragtime music. It also serves as meta-nonfiction because it is also about the author's discovery of the synchronicity in these connections as she researches and writes the essay.¹ White explains that, though she doesn't entirely understand why, she feels a bond to Clemente and a bond with the rag named for him. She tells us,

I believe the universe works this way. Uncle Joe and Roberto Clemente and I, we were destined to interact with one another. It doesn't matter that Joe died last week and Clemente died over twenty-five years ago and I'm still around. That's how time works sometimes.

And, I am to find out, that's how writing is sometimes. I start out chasing one story and then another story starts to chase me. I want to write about Uncle Joe but Roberto Clemente jumps in. And then other forces become involved. You see how it is. Sometimes a writer has no choice. (209-10)

¹ The theme of Christine White's essay on synchronicity was sadly validated by life itself. After "Reflection Rag" was accepted for publication, Christine White and her husband were killed in a plane crash, as Roberto Clemente had been. As tragic as this event was, it was one about which Christine White had already said, "I believe the universe works this way." These circumstances give unsettling relevance to the themes of her essay.

At the end of this segment she writes, “I tell you, it’s the best part of writing sometimes, to play hide and seek this way with the past, to live things again, and to write about ragtime” (210).

As the essay progresses, we learn more about Roberto Clemente, including the bias he faced as a baseball player and the circumstances surrounding his death in an airplane crash as he was returning to Puerto Rico; as it happened, Clemente died on Christine White’s birthday. We learn more, as well, about Uncle Joe, including his difficult personality, his prickly relations with his wife and son, his finally coming to accept the granddaughter whose Latina mother his son was afraid to commit to because of his father’s bias; we learn too about Scott Joplin and ragtime music, how the “left hand on the piano plays the stride bass or *basso continuo*, keeping the pulse with the characteristic *oom pah* beat” and the “right hand plays the melodies and rhythmically works against the left hand” (212), how Joplin’s wife refused to have “Maple Leaf Rag” played at his funeral, how his final composition was titled “Reflection Rag.”

In a segment titled “No Simple Stories,” White writes: “I think it would be nice to write a simple story for once but there are no simple stories. Just simple ideas and little insights that take a long time in telling. All of this back and forth, the meshing of the pieces of this ragtime puzzle, is how I sort through the ideas that fill my head when I write” (218). Later she reminds us, “I told you before. We really don’t choose our stories. When we’re hot, our stories chase us until we catch them” (218). The essay illustrates this, as if it is being written while we are reading it.

As I’ve suggested, the theme of “Reflection Rag” is synchronicity, the obscure but suddenly obvious connections between people and objects and events that we do not realize are there, have been there all along. How can one make sense of synchronous connections? How can one work through them? David Roberts wrote the rag after seeing a film about Roberto Clemente and wanting to commemorate him somehow. Christine White explains that “As a musical composition, ‘Roberto Clemente’ has four musical themes or melodies. These themes vary and repeat, vary and repeat, returning with nuances and interpretations determined by the composer and the performer.” Then she adds, “To me this sounds a lot like life” (222). To that response I can only add that, to me, this sounds a lot like her essay. She herself has written what may be the only nonfiction rag and made “Reflection Rag” not only the title of both a Joplin tune and her essay but also a new form for nonfiction.

Moreover, Christine White is right about the way that writing works. Think of her statement, “All this back and forth, meshing the pieces of this ragtime puzzle, is how I sort through the ideas that fill my head when I write” (218). For a moment, in your mind’s eye, see that image of someone moving around pieces of a puzzle, experimenting with the placement of one piece in juxtaposition to several others, looking for a place where its shape locks against another shape or at least suggests the shape of a missing piece that might link the two pieces that she has. When we write, we are continually working with pieces of puzzles, and the rules say we can only play with what we’re given—we can’t manufacture linking pieces to complete the design; instead, we have to make sense of only the pieces we’ve turned face up. The puzzles you buy in a store are easier to complete—the pieces were cut deliberately from an original whole, made to go back together, constructed so that they fit back into their original mold. But

nonfiction puzzles never show you an original image that can be eventually reconstructed from the pieces you have before you; some pieces will always be missing, most pieces will never fit tightly with another piece, and the pieces you're trying to arrange into a whole may not have come from the same original—perhaps they came from several or perhaps from no entire original whole at all. You may not only have to experiment with where the pieces go in order to imagine how they fit together, you may also have to experiment with their arrangement in order to get anyone else to see what you see in the pieces before you. To help the reader understand what the writer feels about synchronicity and ragtime, it may be necessary to write a nonfiction rag.

The Malleability of Contemporary Nonfiction

One of the elements of contemporary creative nonfiction that makes it an experimental art is its malleability in the face of an author's need to invent a completely new design to accommodate the subject she's writing about; it demands as well that the author find a way to guide readers through a form they can't have had any experience with. A ragtime essay may reveal to another writer or to any reader the possibilities inherent in an experimental art—the way a structure may be created or invented to meet a need—but, unlike such formulaic models as the “five-paragraph theme” and the “inverted pyramid,” it doesn't provide a template, a boilerplate, a ready-made mold to be filled.

Contemporary creative nonfiction abounds in examples of idiosyncratic experimental forms. Some, like Nancy Willard's “The Friendship Tarot” or John McPhee's “The Search for Marvin Gardens,” are so distinctive and individual that they are unlikely to lead directly to anyone else's work. What are the chances another essayist will find it appropriate to invent a tarot deck and imagine a reading in order to tell the story of a friendship, as Willard does? What are the odds of another essayist needing to alternate between a board game and a tour of the city its based on, as McPhee does between “Monopoly” and Atlantic City?

Other essays suggest an interplay that seems obvious enough that other writers may be prompted to experiment in their own ways with its design. For example, Wendy Rawlings opens her essay called “Virtually Romance: A Discourse on Love in the Information Age” with a series of epigraphs about time, the Internet, and relations between men and women and then provides a scene of a man and a woman spending time together as the consummation of an Internet relationship. From that segment she braids together three strands—a series of excerpts from the couple's e-mail under the heading “Cyberspace,” a series of reflections on online romance under the heading “Tempus Fugit,” and a series of scenes from various states of mind in various states (“Abiding, Utah”)—and concludes with sections on how to buy a personal computer and how to snorkel in the British Virgin Islands. The crotches or segments are short, the braiding or interlocking linkage tight, and the sad and funny chronology is clear, but rather than narrate a story in chronological sequence or argue some thesis drawing on the example of her own experience, Rawlings experimented with form in order to discover one that matched the reality of her subject.

Or, to take another example, Rebecca McClanahan is similarly experimental in the essay “The Riddle Song.” The title refers to an old folk song which begins with a series of enigmatic statements (“I gave my love a cherry, it had no stone/I

gave my love a chicken, it had no bone/I told my love a story that has no end/I gave my love a baby with no crying”), then questions those statements (“How can there be a cherry that has no stone? . . .”), and finally explains the statements (“A cherry when it’s blooming, it has no stone . . .”). Except for the story (“The story of I love you, it has no end”), the statements end up being about bringing forth life. McClanahan weaves together scenes from different times in her life involving birth, death, childhood, motherhood, generations of women interacting with one another, all threaded through the lyrics to the folk song. As in countless other contemporary examples, the pattern of this essay is determined by the pattern of the experience, the juxtapositions and associations and sympathetic vibrations of accumulating knowledge—as is the pattern of Christine White’s essay.

Teaching an Experimental Art

I’ve been stressing the uniqueness of Christine White’s essay partly because I want to insist on its problematic value as a model for other writers. By “problematic” I mean that no one else should sit down to write another nonfiction rag (unless ragtime is as essential to the theme and the structure of the essay as it is in White’s). I once used an excellent student narrative about a drunken party in her hometown as an example for my first year composition class of powerful storytelling—characterization, dialogue, narrative arc, reflection—only to get from them a collection of haphazard stories about behaving badly while stoned. One of the ways we all respond to what we read is to link it to our own experiences; this is the great power of memoir and personal narrative—as memoirist Patricia Hampl says, “You give me your story, I get mine.” It’s good to find a text that triggers connections with what has meaning for us, but it’s problematic to use the text simply as a template for recording those connections. Students trying to link family death, celebrity death, and popular music in imitation of “Reflection Rag” are inviting disaster that isn’t unique to ragtime essays—imitating “Once More to the Lake” by E. B. White or “Politics and the English Language” by George Orwell or “Living Like Weasels” by Annie Dillard can get them into the same trap. What I want students to appreciate about any of these essays is the way the form is constructed to lead the reader through the content the way the writer herself understands it.

The unfolding “narrative” of “Reflection Rag” follows the arc of the author’s encounters with these synchronous connections and her blossoming awareness of their significance or meaning, rather than the chronology of events according to the dates when they occur. In its forward progress her essay emulates the piecing together of the puzzle she talks about, but it also emulates the multiple layers of the typical rag—what she calls its “syncopations, broken rhythms, and shifting accents,” its “melodies and counter melodies,” its “embellishments” and “grace notes.” By experimenting with the content of the essay—the disparate subtopics, the varied strands or movements or motifs—she experiments with creating an appropriately reflective form, the nonfiction equivalent of the matching of lyrics and melody in an ideally-composed song. I want students to take away from a reading of “Reflection Rag” an appreciation of what experimenting with meaning and design can accomplish, the art and power of the essay. I want them to understand that an essay needn’t only march relentlessly forward from beginning to end; an essay can also dance. My primary motive for stressing the uniqueness

of Christine White's essay is my hope of encouraging the uniqueness of student essays. Too often the goal of writing courses and writing textbooks seems to be the achievement of the predictable, but a writer's real achievement comes when she or he writes an unpredictable paper, a paper only she or he could have written, a paper unique to that writer.

Predictably, perhaps, there's no predictable way to teach an experimental art except experimentally. One notion that has appealed to me over the years is what the columnist Tom Wicker calls, "assiduous string-saving" (49), by which he means the continual jotting down of notes and observations about topics of personal or professional interest, creating a pool of references that may be drawn from when needed. It intensifies the kind of associations writers often make from memory (as when I hearken back to a misguided use of a sample essay in a composition class from years ago or when I link one essay I've read with another). Lists and notes and clippings build webs of associations that may be completed by fruitful connections further along. The Detroit columnist Jim Fitzgerald used to keep a folder of notes and clippings and go through it looking for associations between seemingly disparate items to leap out at him and inspire an exploratory essay. The poet and essayist Sydney Lea often asks students to look for topics in two separate journal entries. In either case the writer has to trust that the subconscious mind will recognize associations that are in some way important to the writer and that the process of composing from those premises will lead to further discoveries. There are no formula for entering this kind of composition and no possibility that a detached, disinterested writer will achieve anything this way. It requires ongoing engagement and the expectation that experimenting will lead to discovery.

Another way of experimenting with associations that I've used with students, particularly when I've wanted to help a class write segmented essays, is the creation of a heuristic grid. For the most part students who read segmented essays, which make up a large percentage of contemporary published essays, will intuitively gravitate toward the form, but it's also useful to emphasize the range of possibilities by specifically teaching segmentation. I'll ask students to draw horizontal and vertical lines on a sheet of paper to form nine to twelve boxes, and then, in a freewriting activity, enter into the boxes as many associations with a topic they've chosen as they can think of—vignettes, anecdotes, images, literary (including musical and cinematic) allusions, family or historical parallels, and the like. Clustering and mapping exercises can have a similar effect. What are the personal, artistic, social, psychological associations they make with their topic? What kinds of evidence and references connect to their central image or event? If whatever they're thinking about is their subject homepage, what hyperlinks would they attach to it and where would they take the online reader? If the reader were invited to leap from one section of the grid to another and then to another, in what order would they arrange the items on the grid? what would they discard? what would they add?

Yet another way, even more visually oriented than these first two, is to talk about different ways of reading images. I use photographs as heuristic devices a great deal in my own writing and have carried the habit over into my classes. I have scanned into the computer a World War II photograph by Robert Capa of four people gathered around a Sicilian shoeshine stand and an image of Jan van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb* (Ghent) Altarpiece, a polyptych of multiple panels

depicting the Last Judgement, the earthly paradise with worshipful saints, and the figures of Adam and Eve, and shown both to my students. The Capa is the kind of photograph we're most accustomed to, one unified image recording a single moment in a single scene; the van Eyck, divided into separate panels juxtaposing single figures with landscapes and group portraits and differences of scale and emphasis, demands an associative, cumulative reading. On the computer I have been able to remove panels from the frames of the Van Eyck altarpiece and substitute for some of them images from the Capa photograph, suggesting that there is more than one way to represent the event, more than one level of meaning that can be depicted in the images. We discuss what images we might find to fill the blank panels in this "Capa Polyptych" depending upon who we are and how we might relate to the images we already have—if the Sicilian scene represents what might be seen by a reporter or researcher, the panels would be filled with something different than what would be placed there by someone seeing it as a participant or a descendant of any of the people in the scene or an individual who has lived a similar scene. The images in the panels are equivalent to segments in an essay; when we realize that, we are ready to begin experimenting with the essay as we have experimented with the multi-paneled altarpiece, substituting prose for pictures.

Some essays are snapshots, candid pictures; some are studio portraits, formal and posed; some are polyptychs, arrangements of various images that create a collective, multi-faceted whole. Before you can experiment with form, you need to have an awareness of how flexible the form of nonfiction can be.

Living in an Experimental World

We are all accustomed by now to read the world as texts and to use the patterns of those texts to tell our stories. So, in our nonfiction, we draw upon the repetitions and patterning of quilting; the flashbacks, flashforwards, close-ups and crane shots, cross-cutting and split-screen editing of film; the multiple-voiced alternation of first person testimony and omniscient narration, stills and stock footage and dramatizations of television documentary; the framing of photography; the juxtapositions of hypertexts and anime and comic book art. Although writing classrooms and textbooks seldom acknowledge it, nonfictionists have been doing this for a very long time.

The world we and our students live in is routinely, often outrageously, experimental. We come to know that world by association, juxtaposition, disjunction, intuition, experimentation, much more than we know it by logos, linearity, conjunction, formulation. By experimenting with nonfiction, we aren't rejecting formulas that would have produced a more predictable result—the only predictable outcome of writing in formulas is that the writing will be formulaic. The only predictable outcome of writing experimentally is that the writer will be more engaged, committed, and challenged by the writing, and those are the qualities in the writer that most predictably generate better writing. When we experiment with nonfiction, we are simply doing nonfiction the way it *needs* to be done because nonfiction is an experimental art. ☺

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